



ROBERT OWEN'S UTOPIAN SOCIALISM AND EDUCATIONAL REFORMS IN NIGERIA; A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Capitalist economy within the 19th and 20th century has been adjudged not favorable to the workers. Workers in this era were greatly exploited by the few bourgeoisie who owns and controls the means of production. The bourgeoisie lived luxuriously at the expense of the everyday labor of the Proletariat. The exploitation of the poor by the rich resulted in class struggle between the different strata of the society. It is against this unequal stratum of the society that Robert Owen propelled audibly his ideas on utopian socialism that is centered on cooperative communities, equal and equitable distribution of the means of productions. In the same light, Owen proposed education as one of the basic foundation of the society, believing that a better system of education can develop men with superior characters that can in turn gradually exterminate exploitations, social isolation, and class struggles. Apparently, the current Nigerian educational system since has been perceived to be under the great influence of the elements of capitalism which has hitherto, availed the poor little or no standard education hence the rising needs to modify the educational system. Though there has been concerted efforts towards improving Nigerian education system, this efforts are still considered insufficient or viable enough to sustain a standard education system, hence the demands for an alternative education reforms that is aimed at a better Nigeria consolidated on unity and progress. This research deploys the method of comparative analysis towards identifying the similarities and differences between Owen's concept of Utopian socialism and Nigerian Educational Reforms. Thus, inflaming questions like, Is Nigerians Educational system in par with the global educational practices? How practicable is Owens utopian socialism vis a vis his educational model in the light of Nigeria dispositions? What are the challenges of Owens utopian socialism? What are the success and challenges of Nigerians Educational Reforms? Furthermore, can there be any viable offer from Owens utopianism to Nigerian Educational system? With the above concerns at heart, this research identified Owens utopian socialism as paternalistic and only limited to conventional spaces. While there are great similarities between Owens utopian socialism and Nigerians Educational Reforms, the research pointed out inadequate funding, corruption, infrastructure decay, bureaucratic inefficiencies, political instability, teacher shortages etc, as the challenges of Nigerian Educational Reforms, hence recommendations were made towards solving these perennial problems. This work shall also add to the existing literature for further researches in this field.



INTRODUCTION

There has been concerns over the prevalence of capitalist tendencies in the daily run of the affairs of men. Thus, the existence of various structures of oppression and subjugation against a segment of the society that could be referred to as less fortunate. These less fortunate precisely made of artisans, proletariats or workers as the case may be, obviously live below their needs in life. They suffer more, they work at a long stretch of time. They are of the largest components of the society. However, at their expense, the rich few, the capitalist if properly mentioned; taste and enjoy the luxuries of life. On the other hand, Nigeria, as a diverse African nation with a complex history of colonialism, independence struggles, and post colonial development, has undergone significant educational reforms to address issues of access, quality, and relevance in its educational system. From pre-independence initiatives to current efforts to align education with national development goals and global standards. However, with the enormous population of school age students numbering in millions, it is almost impossible for any developing nation to sufficiently finance and manage such a huge enterprise without major hiccups.¹ Access to standard quality education in such developing nation such as Nigeria becomes virtually impossible for the poor. The rich few enjoy the best life can offer. Particularly, within the context of this research, they have the best form of education and academic learning; major thanks to the proliferation of private schools and institutions of learning. These institutions are such that; only those with commensurable living standards can afford the total cost of sending their wards there. Comparatively, the research work evaluates the public school, government owned institutions if properly mentioned, the obvious lack in the basic requirements are quite exasperating. Particularly, the primary and secondary schools, peculiar to them are worst situations like; poor classrooms, poor laboratories etcetera.

Owen in his concept of utopian socialism, advocated for a cooperative society where individuals would live and work together in harmony. Generally, the utopian socialist believed that people of all classes could voluntarily adopt their plan for society if it was presented convincingly.² Central to Owens vision was the idea that education played a crucial role in shaping individuals and the society, hence he proposed free, quality education for all, believing that well educated and empowered individuals would contribute positively to the society. Owen also advocated for improved living and working conditions, healthcare and social services to support the wellbeing of the members of the society. Consequently, the study of utopian visions of the society and their practical implementations provides invaluable insights into the development of social, economic, and educational systems across different cultures and historical periods. The research therefore aims at borrowing insights and ideas that could better the Nigerian education system and the nation at large. The work thus seeks to establish a point of convergent and divergent between Robert Owens utopian socialism and Nigerian educational reforms. Fortunately, the researcher commends the ideas of Robert Owen as a worthy cache of developmental ideas needed to aid a better education reform and a better Nigeria at large.

This study identified some inherent problems in Nigerian's educational foundations, such as inadequate funding, corruption, infrastructure decay, bureaucratic inefficiencies, political instability, teacher shortages etc. Hence this research is aimed at addressing this problems. More so, by juxtaposing Owens visionary social principles with pragmatic realities of Nigerians educational policies and practices, this research aims to uncover the underlying challenges, successes, and implications inherent in melding utopian ideologies with systemic reforms on national scale.

In order to accomplish its aim, the work sets out to pose such critical questions like: How does the foundational principles of Robert Owens Utopian Socialism align with or diverge from the current goals and objectives of Nigerian educational reforms? To what extent have Nigerian educational reforms incorporated elements of communal ownership, equality, and social harmony advocated by Owen, and what challenges have risen in actualizing these ideals within the Nigerian context? In what



way do the cultural, economic, and infrastructural realities of Nigeria align with Owens utopian aspirations and how does these shape the outcomes and effectiveness of educational reforms in Nigeria? What are the historical and political context that have influenced both Nigerian educational reforms and utopian vision? Is the Nigerian educational system in par with the global educational practices? Furthermore, can there be any reasonable offer from this research to inform policy making, institutional practices, and societal perceptions of education as a catalyst for social transformation and progress.

Apparently, the research sets out to address these problematic and fundamental questions that are seeking for answers by providing a nuanced understanding of the complexities inherent in reconciling utopian visions with practical educational reforms within the unique cultural, historical, and institutional landscape of Nigeria. Thus, this research seeks to offer insights that can potentially inform future policy decisions, educational innovations, and broader societal debates on transformative power of educational systems in fostering sustainable social change and development. The work shall also add to the existing literature in this field. By juxtaposing the ideals of Owens Utopian Socialism with the educational reforms in Nigeria, this study seeks to explore the underlying philosophical, social, and practical implications for educational systems within the context of developing nation. The research will therefore interrogate the prevailing historical, economic and institutional circumstances that have ensured that some privileged few has assumed the role of subject while positing the multitudes of laborers as the *Other*; limited in so many areas and capacities. This will be done with a special attention to Robert Owen, an accomplished industrialist and business man having lived through seasons and times of obvious exploitation of the lower class, thus opine that the inexperienced will hastily conclude that; the results are impracticable and when practicable, men are too vicious, selfish and ignorant to promote a change which will ensure equal privileges to all. However, we believe that through the self-interest of men, these objections may be overcome. For the experienced know that all nations might, now, and easily adopt arrangements to produce more of all kinds of essential to the happiness of all.³

The evils associated with societal class oppression cannot be over-emphasized. From it, stems all forms of tyranny, objectification, domination, abuse of rights, et cetera. More worrisome is the thriving of these vices as a result of widespread ignorance and lack of knowledge.⁴ This research thus, amplifying the ideas of Robert Owen in his theory of *utopian socialism* as well as shading its light on the processes of educational reforms in Nigeria, will contribute its quota in the intellectual formation of the newer generation, convincing them of the equality of all men (the rich, the poor, the master and servants alike).⁵ Likewise, it will help inculcate in them, the awareness of rejecting all forms of oppression projected in this view of a better society.

Comparative Analysis of Robert Owen's Utopian Socialism and Nigerian Educational Reforms.

A close look at Owen and the Nigerian educational reform has shown that Robert Owen's utopian socialism had a strong ambient on the need for environmental awareness and stable social circumstance in prospect for a well-educated individual. This is similar to the Nigerian reform policies' intrinsic demand for a stable and academic oriented environment for the education of individuals. This is seen through the various indications from the educational policies (i.e., The new U.B.E. education policy) on the need of a child to go to school in a stable academic environment, free from homely distractions for the little children.⁵ Robert Owen's concept of education in his utopia shares the same boundaries with the Nigerian Educational reform system with regards to the importance attached to the agents of learning and education.



Owen in his work the book of the new moral world, gives pride of place to teachers and as well parents as forming an intense aspect of the child's developmental circumstances.⁶ More so, the Nigerian reform policies in education as well calls for the need of well-trained teachers to satisfy the educational needs of the country. Owen pivots his concepts on education more importantly on children. For Owen, education of the child should be giving a special concern since it is the basics for formation of individual's character, though the Nigerian education system as well accommodates adults, there is a great stake on education for children which is seen as the basis of foundation for a better individual. Robert Owen considers education as a basic tool for individual and national development. Much more, this not far from the ideas and initiatives of the Nigerian educational policy. Owen in his utopia proposed and practiced free education. The Nigerian educational reform policies as well implemented some level of academic cost-free initiatives as seen in the U.B.E reform policy.⁷ Owen in proposing one of the basic tools for child development stressed the need for practice, not just theories as taught in the classroom.⁸ In the same light, the National Education policy of 1982, had as its basic initiative, the introduction of 6-3-3-4 educational system to accommodate for more practical aspects of education such as technical and vocational studies, rather than purely academic pursuits which seemed possible only to high ability children. The similarity between the reform ideologies of Owen and the Nigerian educational reform policies is as well identified in the goal and purpose of the both. Owen preaches the good-news of educational reform for a better society. Where man is taught the basics of humanity to aid his existence amongst his fellow men, borrowing from this thought, Nigerian educational reform is geared towards re-engineering the internal mechanism of the Nigerian society through a more adequate educational policy. Via- Negativa, Owen's utopia and the educational reform system in Nigeria exchange banter in one basic reason for their failures. This basic reason is human divergences. Intricately, one of the reasons Owen's Utopia ceased in progress was because of some level of misunderstandings amongst its inhabitants. Similarly, the early days of the Nigerian educational policies suffered setbacks as a result of its divergent approaches in different regions. These different approaches were in a bid to meet up with the divergent human needs in various regions of the nation. Unfortunately, the nascent nation just new from colonial dependence lacked the wherewithal to cohere such intrinsic divergence. Though Nigerian educational reforms shares some intricate similarities with Owen's Utopian socialism, they also vary in some certain fundamental positions. It is worthy to note that the basic approach of the two ideas were reactionary in its essence. While Owen's ideas on reform were as a reaction to the harm posed by a capitalist economy, the Nigerian educational reform policy was in its basic fundamentals a reaction to the harms of British colonization and later on, the effects of the Biafra war and effects of ethnic diversity. Such reactions is often aimed at introducing a new method of doing things against the established old order. Owen preached his good-news of reforms for the western world, the Nigerian educational reform policies were basically for the country in particular. The two ideas differ in time. While Owen's reform was at its peak in the 19th century (i.e., 1800s,) The Nigerian educational reform policy was just a matter of yester-years: From 1960s downwards. Just as stated above, the both ideas differ in their historicity. While Owen's reforms came from a backdrop of an ill-capitalist economy, the Nigerian educational reform policies come against the severe hits of colonialization, Biafra war and ethnic disparities. Owen's reform was an individual agenda meanwhile the Nigerian educational reform policies was a child born out of national outcry. This implies that it was a national issue supported in its entirety by the government and the people at large.⁹ This is unlike that of Owen which at some point met with counter approaches and reception by the government and even the people. With the landscape of the reform ideas still in view, Owen's reform ideologies were introduced and practiced by certain set of people. While the Nigerian reform policies were obviously a national cake for every one's consumption. More so, Owen's ideologies gained a wider reception amongst the westerners. Till date the Nigerian educational reform policies are predominantly etching their changes within the Nigerian education sector. Considering the letters of the various ideologies, Owen dwells adequately on the natural constructs of man like; feelings, will, desire etc. However, the Nigerian



educational reform policy does not make adequate elaboration of this natural constructs of man. Owenism was critically against religion.¹⁰ The Nigerian educational policy was and is never against religion. Obviously, she accepts the teaching and learning of religious studies in her schools. Owenism was radical and critical in content. This is conspicuous enough judging from its outright critique of the laws, politics and economy structure of his time. On the contrary, the Nigerian educational system is not just a sleeping lamb but it is quite afraid of change and lacks the independence to question the existing order. This is because, the educational system is a tool in the hand of the government to extend their campaigns. The above assertion is obvious from the history of educational reforms in the nation. The reforms were all convened at the behest of the federal government and sponsored them. This obviously severs the supposed independence of the ministry of education.

From the above expositions, this work though not priding an entire exhaustion of all the angles of comparison, however to a reasonable extent has done quite well in deducing the essential similarities and differences between the reform ideas of Owenism and the reform policies of the Nigerian educational sector. What then follows will be an evaluative unit. Questioning the impact of both Owenism and the reform policies of the Nigerian educational sector and finally cracking out any reasonable offer the utopian socialism of Owen can give for the modification and consolidation of the Nigerian educational sector.

Conclusion

The research detailed the ideas of Robert Owen in-depth in his concept of utopian socialism. More so, it has also carried out a panoramic view of the advent and growth of the Nigerian education system through the various reform processes.

However, in the philosophical quadrangle, no idea or concept whatsoever is wholesome and sufficient nay exhaustive of the larger worldview concerning a particular subject matter. It is always conspicuous that the development of a new idea or worldview entails the resurrection of continued questioning and inquiries concerning the particular subject matter. It is always a cross circle of thesis and anti-thesis. Fortunately, enough, the circle never turns to a whole 360 degree. However, it keeps extending beyond without an elastic limit. In that regard, the research work having detailed the required content of the subject matters of concern, engages in a more philosophical and critical endeavor by carrying out a critical evaluation of the wealth of ideas therein. For the exhaustion of the requisites of a detailed critical evaluation, the research work highlights the pros and then the cons follow. At the twilight of the research work, the necessary offers of which the ideas of Owen could contribute to a better reform of the Nigerian education system are also amplified.

Apparently, the ideological wealth of every thinker is weighed in the measures of their originality, ingenuity, and ability to assert their ideas notwithstanding the waves of criticisms and its fraying seams. This is also obvious about Robert Owen.¹¹ He made frantic efforts to think for himself, disengaging himself from the ideological chains of his time. His attitude towards revolution is positive and as well applaudable. He sought to freeze off the ills of the era he existed in. It is without doubt that Owen deserves his flowers for such an impeccable attitude.

Owen in-depth in his work believed and advocated for common ground for all. Through his analysis of the natural makeup of the human person, he posited that; a proper understanding of the natural make-up of the human person will prove to everyone that; there is no place for critics, self - justification and more so, discrimination against one another.¹² Furthermore, one good moral worth in Owen that ought to be appreciated is his courage. Indeed, Owen was a courageous individual.



Because, he had to pull through the odds of the prosaic day, stood his ground even against the ideas of the government and capitalists that were in charge of the means of human existence.

Owen through the development of his ideas gave pride of place to education and continuous learning as a tool and necessary step towards a better human society. Owen painstakingly undertook the study of the human natural compositions to aid his idea of developing a better education sector and policy. He believed that: the proximate cause of the wrong order of things during his time was the lack of basic ideas by our founding fathers on the natural constitutions of the human person.¹³ Thus, leading to ostensible economic arrangements and evils in the society. However, he believes that through the right system of education and learning, young minds would be tutored on the actual natural compositions of the human person. This will aid purify the society and instill a sense of love amongst human beings.

Owen in his concept of Utopian socialism had the bearings of the mere workers at heart. Thus, he advocated for a better working condition for the workers which constituted the majority in the society. In a more practical aspect, he provided resources for his workers, including free childcare, housing, shorter workdays, free education for children, and restrictions on child labor.¹⁴

Owen in his bid to proffer a better working condition for the workers initiated the eight-hour working day policy.¹⁵ This has become a paradigm in modern labor practices even up till this century. The fact that such an idea proposed by Owen as far back as the 19th century still engenders a wider sense of relevance is quite encouraging. This idea of the eight-hour workday policy extends from the European labor tradition to the African labor culture. Thus, suggesting its depth and acceptance of his ideas.

Owen deserves a hearty pat on the back for not just positing his ideas, however made a step at depicting his ideas in reality. Owen attempted to create utopian socialist communities, such as New Harmony in Indiana. These experiments aimed to foster cooperation, self-sufficiency, and education. Many philosophers and thinkers had their packs of ideas rolled out with none ever attempting to even think of its pragmatic relevance and practicability not to talk of investing in it to bring it to reality.

Owen's thoughts on what the commercial order of the society should be was interesting. He believed in a commercial arrangement that accommodated for the needs of everyone and as well sufficed for the inputs of everyone. Thus, for Owen; the commercial arrangements of society, as far as their influence extends, are equally extravagant in the waste of wealth, as well as otherwise so injurious to the character of all who are engaged in producing, preserving, distributing, and consuming wealth. However, if these departments were united on sound principles and properly conducted, they would ensure permanent prosperity and happiness to all its members.¹⁶

The sincere efforts of Owen are appreciated. Nevertheless, it does not erase the limitations therein. Thus, Robert Owen through his ideological suppositions could be considered an empiricist. However, in his discourse on the constitution of the human person he posits that; "That man is a compound being, whose character is formed of his constitution or organization at birth, and of the effects of external circumstances upon it from birth to death; such original organization and external influences continually acting and re-acting each upon the other".¹⁷

Owen proposes that; no one will dispute the truth of this fact; because there can be only the original organization of the individual at birth, and the influence of external circumstances upon it, afterwards, to form its character at every moment of its existence.



Following the flow of his thoughts, When Owen speaks of the human person as being made of his original constitutions at birth, one envisages a pro-rationalist relating the possibilities of innate ideas. However, when the same Owen begins to pose the effects of the external environment as being more influential, if not the sole determinant of the development of men, the researcher tends to question:¹⁸ Is Owen a rationalist or an empiricist? In the same vein, such inconsistencies poses great limitations to the proper understanding of his work.

Owen preaches the Gospel of determinism and perpetual realism. This he proposed by stating that;
“Each individual is so organized, that he is made to receive a superior character, when his original constitution contains the best proportion of the elements of human nature, and when the circumstances which surround him from birth, and through life, are of a character to produce superior sensations only; or, in other words, when the laws, institutions, and customs, under which he lives, are all in unison with the laws of his nature.”¹⁹

Following this line of thought, the researcher questions the place of change in the work of Owen. Nevertheless, one cannot consciously discard the possibility of change. Even Owen contradicts his initial beliefs. Wherein his details for the birth of a better society, he amplified the need for education to re-configure the mind of the world, on a later note stating that: the possibility of having superior beings is relegated only to them having the best form of external formulations right from birth, then this begs the question and concern; what then is the essence of the struggle for a better education? Does it mean that inferior beings cannot transcend their limitations in different capacities? Does it mean that if one’s initial environment saw him a thief, does it mean that such a thief can’t redress his steps and become a better person? Certainly, there is a place for change.

Owen in his work criticized religion as one of the ills harming the society. Owen explains that;
“The religious mania of man ever has been, now is, and while it remains, will be, the curse of humanity. It will destroy all human rational faculties, continue to make the human race more vicious than the brute creation, and keep the earth, while possessing all the means to ensure human happiness, a pandemonium, to torment man and his offspring.”²⁰

In his critics of religion, Owen fails to balance between the relevance and influence of religion in the society. Notwithstanding the ills that Owen believed was necessitated by religion, he could at least see the fact that religion served as the moral conscience of the universe. In this vein, the research work considers Owen’s negative views as being too sentimental and such sentimental views can barely hold sway in a critical system such as philosophy.

The Nigerian educational reform policy has over the years through various programs like the U.B.E 9 engineered the course of a free education for the Nigerian child. This has over the years taken a great number of children to the confines of a class room for a better education. This initiative is thus worthy of applause. The education reform policy has over time made learning and education more accessible. Through the NOUN initiative and other related academic programs, every citizen both the busy, employed, business personnels etc. have access to academic programs at their desired schedule. This obviously is worthy of applause.

The Nigerian educational system as well deserves a thumbs up for its thirst towards originality. As stated during the early days of the reforms, one of the basic driving forces towards the need for reform was; the necessity to break the chains of dependence on British system of education. Nigeria still new



as an independent country was suffering the aftermaths of colonization. Thus the fact that the national education policy, through its various reforms, have tried to engineer a system of education original to the cultural, historical and geographical background of the Nigerian people is quite applaudable.

The case of the Nigerian educational system is quite pathetic. Where in the past years it fought to break the chains of Western colonization, in the present day, it is faced with a fight against corrupt political engineers who try to use the educational system as a subterfuge for their evil dynamics. These politicians make education part of their manifestos, however, they neither fulfill their promises nevertheless they still use education as a tool to confine the ideas of these children to their desired thought system. In this case, you see the removal of history from the curriculum all in the bid to suit their political whims and caprices.

Through the years of reform, while the various innovations in the academic system are appreciated, this does not sever the abuses that have been incubated in the system. With the National Open University Program, many students don't follow up on their schedules and still come out with their results. This is as a result of the issue of academic fraud existing in the system. To meet the demands of a free education, funds are disbursed for the running of the education system. However, with the low turnout in types of equipment, qualified teachers, and lots more, it is obvious that education funds are misappropriated. All these and more still make a case against the Nigerian educational reform system.

In this case, the Nigerian nation can be perceived as a dreamer who dreams beyond his/her reach. Obviously, the nation cannot care for her educational visions. Certainly, the resources may be available however, they are grossly abused and use for only the wrong reason. This being the case, schools are found being in lack in various areas. i.e., human capacity, teaching equipments, good schooling environments etc. Consequently they form a severe obstacle to the progress of the education agenda in the country.

At this juncture, though not entirely exhaustive of the merits and demerits of the Nigerian educational policy, the research work tries to find how comparatively, can the ideas of Robert Owen in his utopian socialism be of reasonable offer to the Nigerian education system. One of the basic foundations of Owen's idea on education was its independence from the state and its politics. In the Nigerian context, the independence of education will aid the growth of the sector and free it from the capricious influence of politicians.

Owen considered physical, mental, and emotional well-being. For Owen, the ills suffered today are as a result of the lack in the proper understanding of the formulations of the human nature. Such holistic approach to education can benefit Nigerian students. Owen believed so much in the need for a good external environment to flourish the internal. This is also necessary for the Nigerian education sector where the schools are in shambles. Owen believed that education should be accessible to everyone, regardless of their social or economic background. In Nigeria, adopting this principle could help ensure that all children receive quality education. Owen went further to emphasize the importance of education for children. For Owen, focusing on foundational learning during the early years can significantly impact a child's development. This as well will encourage the Nigerian education sector to send children to school at all cost instead of roaming the street as itinerant herders. Owen had as one of its goals that; proper education should resonate the spirit of acceptance amongst one another and courage. Such moral advocacy will go a long way in shaping the national history of Nigeria already smeared with hate and blood thirst.



The research work having outlined the ideas of Robert Owen vis a vis the Nigerian education system, was able to come to the intersection that; they share common ground in their emphasis on education as a catalyst for social transformation. While Owen through his revolutionary ideas in-depth in his utopian socialism, craves for a system of education rooted in community-based learning and equal access, the Nigerian educational policy through its revolutionary reforms also sets a path of education based on a free educational program for children and adults. It as well tries to meet up with demands of the modern time by; providing for a system of education where the employed and working class can as well access academic programs. Furthermore, both recognize the importance of holistic development, ethical education, and early childhood learning. While Owen's practical influence was limited, his ideas resonate, urging Nigeria to integrate community engagement and adaptability into its educational framework. Thus, the research work advises that; by drawing insights from Owen's utopian socialism, Nigeria can shape a more equitable and forward-looking education system.

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